

Those attitudes started to shift in the 1970s, when the federal government began cracking down on rampant air and water pollution nationwide. In 1997, Congress adopted a series of policies to reclaim “abandoned mine lands” under the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act.

Undoing decades of widespread damage has proved an enormous task for the EPA, Bureau of Land Management and other federal agencies responsible for addressing the inactive hard-rock mines. The federal government spent at least \$2.6 billion from 1997 to 2008 to reclaim the sites, and agencies estimate they spent roughly \$85 million more every year in this arena.

But in order to clean the mines, agencies must first find where they are and establish what risks they pose. The Bureau of Land Management still hasn't taken an inventory of an estimated 93,000 abandoned hard-rock mines spread across public lands in California, Nevada and Utah. Validating those sites could cost the agency \$212 million and take 20 years to complete, assuming the work is carried out by 10 two-person crews, the agency said in a November 2014 report.

The threat of leaks and spills from these sites is a growing problem as more people move out West, boosting the population’s overall exposure to contaminated water and polluted air. The Gold King Mine spill in Colorado was alarming not just for its size -- other spills in recent years have rivaled this one -- but for how close the brightly colored toxic sludge came to communities in Silverton and Durango and on the Navajo Nation reservation.

Cohen, the Colorado mine expert, said he hopes the alarm raised by this month’s disaster will spur federal and state officials to accelerate their mine cleanup efforts. “It may rekindle that focus,” he said.

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